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December 2019 School of Education Doctoral Hooding Ceremony Alumni Speaker Remarks

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**USF School of Education Doctoral Hooding Ceremony
2019 Alumni Speaker Remarks**

Good afternoon everyone. I am truly honored to be here with each of you today. Dean Koirala-Azad, Associate Deans Cann and Jones-Walker, the distinguished faculty and staff of the School of Education and of course graduates – thank you all for making space for me to share a few thoughts with you on this truly extraordinary day.

So, given that I'm a librarian – y'all should not be surprised that I'm going to use a pillar of American letters – Ralph Ellison – as the jumping off point for my remarks today.

As much as I'd like to think of myself as a person who enjoys great stories – and Ellison's *Invisible Man* is certainly that – not that long ago I had just wrapped up my Ed.D as well. My story for many long years was similar your story –coursework, writing and not much else.

My dissertation title was, well, I'll just share it now -- "The Effects of Using Multimedia Presentations and Modular Worked-out Examples as Instructional Methodologies to Manage the Cognitive Processing Associated with Information Literacy Instruction at the Graduate and Undergraduate Levels of Nursing Education" –WHEW. I had to shorten my final title because it did not fit into the USF student records system. Yea, I like words and concepts - a LOT.

Everyone in the room today knows the struggle is often putting the words and ideas together to tell a compelling story. There are no

dissertation shortcuts. Excellent writing is foundational to the work. But there is more.

In a recently published collection of his letters, Ralph Ellison wrote:

“It isn’t the prose, per se, that worries me; it’s the form, the learning how to organize my material in order to take the maximum advantage of those psychological and emotional currents within myself and in the reader which endow prose with meaning.”

And he went on to say in conclusion that writing is

“...an uncertain battle on a dark terrain.”

There is so much here we could unpack today. But there are a few points this brief passage alludes to that have illuminated my journey since I sat where each of you recent graduates now sits.

In Ellison’s terms, the prose – finding and expressing meaning – writing – is simply the work. It’s the work you will each do going forward with your USF degree in hand.

You name the work. To Ellison, it’s writing. But for us today, the work could be administration. Or teaching. Or research. What each of you do is the work.

One question I hear behind Ellison’s words is how best to engage in the work – the continuous, life-long learning that must take place in order to be our best selves. How to turn the work into something meaningful and transformative that will have a positive impact on people’s lives.

Regardless of where you work – what your material might be – the question is how might you maximize your impact during these times where we are all engaged in uncertain battles on dark terrain?

I have a few suggestions.

First, Community.

How to stay connected and have impact? Simply put, it's in community. Each of you are now a member of a community of scholars. With the exclusivity of a terminal college degree comes tremendous privilege. What better way to pay that forward than through having a lasting impact in your community? I know you know this, but in this crazy fast-paced world, some might lose sight of this need. Please, continue to participate in the positive transformation of your communities.

Second, Spirituality.

I know this one can be challenging, but bear with me please. There are many paths. None are better or worse than another. But there are things I believe you'll find here -- be it spirituality, meditation, the divine, gazing at the stars.

One example that continues to shape me can be found in catholic social teaching where there is a principle generally expressed as the need for a preferential option for the poor. Now, looking around the room, I venture that as educators, many if not most of you live this every day. But for some, like myself at one time, this was a novel idea.

One example from the spaces where I work – libraries - that came to mind while I was preparing these remarks. There typically are no costs to borrowing books from the library – borrowing is rightfully free to all. Yet when you return a book late, there is a fine. Historically, these fines are levied equally. Regardless of your ability to pay, you are charged. We now know this policy placed an unfair burden on those who could not pay. Today, my library no longer charges fines. We have in effect adopted a policy rooted in a preferential option for the poor.

So my question to you – where might you build or extend preferential options to folks in our communities who are struggling? What might you find in the spiritual – however you define it - that could animate your work?

My third final suggestion is that you continue to engage in reflection.

Looking back on Ellison's words, what he called currents within ourselves, I believe he is struggling with the question - what ultimately transforms work into something greater? Each of us can look back on our time here at USF and find something truly remarkable, perhaps even magical. For me an example was taking methods and having that ah-ha moment with validity and reliability. Nerdy I know... but concepts I struggled with early in my coursework. But now I ask – reflect – on how that ah-ha moment has transformed my teaching. This is the difficult work Ellison wrote about. What did my professor do to create a transformative environment for student learning? How can I apply what I learned to create equally transformative moments where I work? Reflection gives us the space to think deeply. Sometimes it is only from building on reflections that we create a spark, a transformation, in another person.

Ellison's summation – “It is an uncertain battle on a dark terrain” – is as true today as it was when he wrote it during the 1950's.

While on one level Ellison was musing on writing as an uncertain battle, undoubtedly the dark terrain was also uncertainty in the world.

Ellison wrote during the era sandwiched between slavery and the civil rights movement. Today we find ourselves between the civil rights movement and mass incarceration. I suggest the world today might not differ all that much from Ellison's time. I'll leave it to you to go read the *Invisible Man* for the first time or to read that tremendous book again and from there to judge for yourselves.

The world today is in many ways a hot mess. Racism, xenophobia, white nationalism, sexism and so many other ugly narratives are currency at the local, state, national and international levels. The uncertain battle on a dark terrain.

But I want to leave you with a different narrative. How might you navigate the future and how might your doctoral degree help make a difference?

I suggest that each of you claim the future by staying in and building community, finding spiritual connections and expressions that works for you, engaging actively in reflective practice... and, applying each of these practices to your work. This way I believe you will set yourself up for the “maximum effect” Ellison also sought in incredibly challenging times.

Each of you has completed one of the most arduous, joyous, heartbreaking, affirming, audacious, journeys one can face -- and you have the sincere admiration of everyone here today sharing in your accomplishments.

You have completed your doctorate. Now, change the world.

Congratulations to the 2019 School of Education doctoral class and thank you.